

physics today

obituaries

Predrag Cvitanović

The growth of physics is sometimes punctuated by tragedy. Such was the case Thursday night, 31 December 1984, when Predrag F. Cvitanovic', assistant professor at Nordita, died unexpectedly at his home in Frederiksberg, Denmark. The last few years of his life he was known to his friends as "former Predrag".

Cvitanovic' was a Croatian boy who made good. He was conceived by parthenogenesis and born on 1 April 1946 in Zagreb. His two fathers, the biological one and the adaptive one, helped raise the precocious child by sending postcards from distant parts of the globe. The mother fed the little child lard-fried flour patties, art history, F. Kafka, and J. Joyce in a home filled with failed poets, spastic sculptors and starved intellectuals with their interminable conversations and their country relatives bringing sausages.

At age 19 Cvitanovic' left his native Croatia, and on 8 August 1965 he arrived by ship in New York. He worked on a GMC Truck & Coach assembly line in Pontiac, Michigan, and sold portraits.

In 1967 he moved to MIT and started studying physics. First, Cvitanovic' revolutionized experimental biophysics with some assistance by Watson and King. Following this brief interlude Cvitanovic' revitalized modern theoretical physics, all of this on diet consisting mostly of spaghetti sauce and portuguese sardines.

Cvitanovic's contributions were so diverse, that a full scientific biography will be needed to put them in perspective. His vita and bibliography alone are stored at the National Center for Atmospheric Research on a specially dedicated CRAY-1 computer.

His thoroughness was a legend; it is not surprising that he was asked to check on the possibility of igniting the atmosphere or the oceans prior to the first test of the filtered cigarette.

Among his major achievements in science one may include Cvitanovic's convincing arguments as to the superiority of his moral fiber compared to that of any other noted physicist of his time.

The scope of Cvitanovic's efforts expanded beyond physics. When not pursuing the elusive bliss of scortatory love, he agonized over infectiousness of HSV II.



On 18 August 1978 he arrived to Copenhagen with two backpacks, two suitcases, cross-country skis and bicycle. He turned physicist and aged quickly. His daily humiliation consisted in begging Nordita secretaries to type a letter for him. He was slow in expressing himself, his speech impaired by advanced polyglocy (toward end of his life he suffered from no less than ten different languages).

Not long before his violent death Cvitanovic' visited Szczszszszszszzyrk, Poland and was told that he was a famous physicist in Poland. Recognition came to late: on 31 December 1984 he was found dead in his bourgeois quarters in Frederiksberg, electrocuted in exasperation by Oblivia, his closest confidante. Since Cvitanovic's nationality could not be reliably established by Danish authorities, his body was raffled off by the Daughters of the American Revolution as part of their annual fund-raising drive.

He is survived by Exceptional Magic, Classics Illustrated - Field Theory and random pages from Selected Chaos. Reprints, his three unfinished books.

Megalesia, the week-long celebration of Cvitanovic's death, was an appropriate tribute to this remarkable man, a legend in his own

time. The streets of New York were covered with nad processions, the theaters with spectators, and the public tables with unbidden guests. Order and police were suspended, and pleasure was the only serious business of the city. The celebration culminated on Saturday, April 5, 1986, at the Helfand & Rowland residence*, in non-violent sports competitions, chaotic n-dimensional ballet, and universal promiscuity. The funeral oration was delivered by Talking Heads. Half of the invited participants survived.

Said to be more moral than Mitchell J. Feigenbaum, Cvitanovic', at long last, has a permanent appointment in heaven.

(ghost written for
Professor Ira Wasserman)

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